

LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HON. THE LORD PROVOST,
MAGISTRATES, AND TOWN-COUNCIL OF
EDINBURGH,

IN REGARD TO THE

CHAIR OF PATHOLOGY

IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

BY JAMES SYME, Esq.

PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL SURGERY.

EDINBURGH :

JOHN CARFRAE AND SON.

M.DCCC.XXXVII.

PRINTED BY JOHN STARK, OLD ASSEMBLY CLOSE.

LETTER, &c.

MY LORD AND GENTLEMEN,

HAVING learned a few weeks ago, that the Council were nearly equally divided in opinion as to the question of abolishing or maintaining the Chair of General Pathology, the Members of the Medical Faculty made a communication to you on the subject.* The object of this communication was to express, in the strongest possible manner, the opinion which the Professors entertained in regard to this Chair ; and, secondly, to relieve the Council from what they seemed to feel would be an obstacle to abolishing it. As might have been, and was anticipated, this proposal gave occasion to much misrepresentation and acrimonious objection. All the three candidates who are in the field have published their criticisms in a separate form, and the friends of these parties, have carried on the warfare through the medium of the newspapers with more zeal than discretion. As the members of the Council, with two or three exceptions, are not of the medical profession, it is not improbable that the various tenders of information and argument thus supplied to them may have excited in their minds a considerable degree of mystification and uncertainty, not at all favourable to a decided course in the approaching settlement of the much agitated affair to which they refer. I therefore beg, very respectfully, to offer some considerations and statements, which my experience as a teacher of anatomy and surgery for the last fifteen years, and the attention which I have been more particularly led to bestow on the subjects con-

* See Appendix, No. I.

nected with the Chair of General Pathology, have suggested to me, in the hope that they will perhaps be of service in assisting you to decide upon what ought to be done.

In the first place, I shall endeavour to explain the grounds of my sincere conviction, that General Pathology is not only useless, but injurious, as a separate subject of medical study.

In considering the education of a physician, we should recollect, that, in order to acquire a sound and complete knowledge of his profession, he must not only be supplied with the necessary information by books and lectures, but also carefully digest what he learns, so as to make it truly his own, and not a mere recollection of words, without definite ideas attached to them. We should, at the same time, not forget, that, in acquiring knowledge, nothing occasions so much embarrassment and loss of time as confusion in the arrangement of the subjects, and variety in the names applied to them ; through which means, indeed, the simplest matters may become too complicated for ordinary comprehension. It follows from these principles, in arranging a course of medical education, that the time of the student should not be occupied by attendance on lectures so much as to exhaust his powers of attention, or unfit him for reading and reflexion in private. Also that he should not be made to attend different lectures on the same subject, especially at the same time, and, if possible, not until he has become so familiar with the subject treated of as to benefit by the diversity of views that may be taken of it, instead of being confused by such diversity of instruction, as he necessarily would be unless thus prepared for it. But the period of study for graduation in this University being four years, and the imperative courses being fourteen in number, while the more important ones, such as Anatomy, Chemistry, Surgery, and Practice of Physic, are always attended at least twice, though the statutes do not require this from unwillingness on the part of the Medical Faculty to prevent all recourse to extra-academical instruction, the student is occupied in the class-room at least

four or five hours a-day on an average, independently of the time required for Practical Chemistry, Practical Anatomy, and hospital attendance. Such being the case, it is obvious that any course not really necessary must be injurious ; and that any course which jars with another from the similarity of its subject and station in the order of study, must be still more hurtful. The questions then come to be, is General Pathology necessary ? and does this course interfere with any other department of instruction ?

For establishing the necessity of a course of General Pathology, it is not sufficient to show that the portion of professional information comprehended under this title is essential to a medical man. General ideas on this as well as other subjects, are extremely useful, but it does not follow that the possession of these implies the power of conveying them to others. On the contrary, it is pretty well known that general ideas, unless they have some practical support, are nearly equivalent to conjecture and uncertainty. In teaching, it sometimes answers best to give the general idea first, and then elucidate it by particular illustrations ; and at other times the opposite method proves more convenient ; but I beg to repeat, that mere generalities of themselves make no lasting impression, and while still recollected, though they may induce in the student a fallacious confidence of knowledge, tend only to darken his perception of the truth. Now the course of General Pathology must consist either of generalities or specialties. In the former case it will be injurious, and in the latter unnecessary.

It has always been the custom to attend Systematic Surgery, or what is also called External Pathology, in the second year of study, and this arrangement is recommended by the public boards which have issued plans for conducting medical education. But General Pathology, we are told, should be taken at this period, and therefore the student would attend together two different Professors, frequently teaching the same subject, and of course occasionally more or less op-

posed to each other in their views as well as expressions,—the effect of which collision could not fail to increase very seriously the difficulties to be overcome.

But there is another objection still more deserving of attention than either of those that have been stated. The chairs of the Practice of Physic and Surgery, Systematic as well as Clinical, are universally admitted to require practical men for their occupants; because the important subjects of instruction appropriated to them are not deemed safely taught, except by teachers who have had an opportunity of acquiring, and have afforded evidence of their possessing, something more than a verbal knowledge of the things they profess to teach. A Professor of General Pathology, on the other hand, need not be a practical man. He may be merely a man of respectable talents and application, well supplied with modern French books, and coloured delineations of morbid appearances, with the assistance of which he may not only appear to others, but even persuade himself, that he is truly acquainted with the subjects of his study. Now, if a person so qualified were to teach General Pathology, or Pathological Anatomy, the student would receive his first impressions of the things in which he is to be instructed by his practical teachers, from a source ever-varying in its doctrines with the fashion of the day; novelty taking the place of experience in determining the views of the teacher, and even altering his language at the dictate of every unledged aspirant to pathological distinction. Early impressions are not easily erased, and the very vagueness of their nature, if established by general statements and the exhibition of drawings, instead of the objects themselves, would still farther oppose their eradication, in order to make way for those required in teaching the sound principles of medical and surgical practice. In illustration of this position, I beg to state that, in my deliberate opinion, a moderately diligent perusal of the Treatise on Carcinoma, by the Professor of Pathological Anatomy in the London University College, would fortify any student of ordina-

ry talents against the most lucid and impressive explanation of no small part of a systematic surgical course.

It has been contended that the example of foreign universities is in favour of maintaining the chair of General Pathology. But before this argument was urged it should have been shown that the cases were parallel, and that the universities at home and abroad were similarly circumstanced. Let us inquire how far they are so.

In all civilized countries it has been considered proper to distinguish with marks of public favour those teachers of literature and philosophy, who, by their writings or oral instructions, appeared eminently qualified for training youthful minds in the acquisition of general and professional knowledge. On the Continent, this is done by investing them with titles, and honours, and salaries from Government. The Professors of foreign universities, so far as their professorial incomes are concerned, depend chiefly or entirely upon fixed salaries, and lecture either gratuitously or for a small fee ; and though specially appointed to teach one or other department of education, they are generally left at liberty to select in addition to this as many more as they please, which are entitled *private*, and for which a fee may be exacted. Thus, for instance, in the University of Berlin, which has been brought very prominently forward on the occasion of the present discussion, there are during the winter session, as may be seen from the list of the Medical Faculty subjoined to this communication,* no fewer than 103 courses undertaken by 41 individuals, who hold the places of Ordinary, Extraordinary, and Private Professors. Where such a system prevails, compulsory attendance on the part of the student is out of the question, and the regulations for obtaining degrees in medicine merely require a certain period of university study, it being not unreasonably expected that the student will hardly neglect the varied opportunities of obtaining information which are placed within his reach, while a stimulus to diligence is maintained by the prospect of examination as to his attain-

* See Appendix, No. II.

ments before receiving university honours, or permission to practise. In such circumstances, the institution of a new chair, or the appointment of a new professor, can never be a source of oppression, since, unless the lectures are valued on their own account, there will be no inducement to attend them.

In the University of Edinburgh, if we except the respectability of the name and station, the advantages held out to the Professors are derived from a different source. Six members of the Medical Faculty have salaries ; five of them to the amount of L. 100 from Government, and one to L. 50 from the Town-Council ; but the remainder of their professorial income, and the whole of that belonging to their colleagues, is derived from the fees which are paid by the students. As it would be inconsistent with the free institutions of this country to prevent any man, who pleases, from teaching, it hence becomes necessary to prevent students wishing to obtain University honours, from being led away by extra-academical teachers, who have not received the stamp of public approbation, through the inducement of smaller fees, the influence of private solicitation, or the deception of popular arts, making arrogant assumption take the appearance of qualification to instruct. A course of study, therefore, is laid down and required to be followed out in this or some other University,—in other words, under teachers who are selected by the public authorities, and thus possess a guarantee for their respectability. If the example of the foreign Universities is to be followed, let the Professors be endowed, and render attendance on their lectures gratuitous as well as optional. But so long as the present compulsory system prevails,—so long as the high fees of the privileged classes call forth a crowd of self-elected lecturers, possessing every shade of respectability and qualification,—and so long as the income which you hold out as a provision to the men on whom you confer the honour of occupying the chairs of our University, depends on the number of their pupils,—I contend that the example of the foreign Universities, however specious in appearance, is totally irrelevant and calculated to mislead.

In reply to the objection which has been opposed to the chair of General Pathology in this University, that no chair of the same kind exists in any other University of the British dominions, it has been assumed that the only evil contemplated on this account was a diminution of the students who qualify themselves for our degree. That the burden of this oppressive, and little palatable course has had the effect just stated, there can be no doubt, since it is notorious to every one acquainted with the students of this school, that many of them have been persuaded, chiefly in order to escape attendance on the course of General Pathology, or what has been represented to them as a loss not only of money but of time, to direct their studies with a view of obtaining the diploma of the College of Surgeons, or the degree of M. D. from some other University. That young men are every winter arrested on the threshold of their University course, and induced to connect themselves with the institutions referred to, is matter, I repeat, of notoriety, and could be proved by the petitions that have, in some instances, been presented to the Medical Faculty for permission to re-enter the ranks, from which the writers had been induced to desert. But the hardship which results from the want of a chair on General Pathology in other Universities, operates still more vexatiously. Every student who graduates in Edinburgh is required by the statutes to spend at least one session here, and many spend no more. During this short stay, they naturally desire to attend the teachers who have acquired the highest character for success and diligence in their respective departments. But General Pathology, though intended for an early part of medical education, and every way repugnant to their inclinations, must be attended by all students, whether their stay be long or short.

It has been asked, “ Does the degree of M. D. confer, or is it intended to confer, a higher status upon its holder than the simple diploma of a surgeon ? ” * Certainly. But as cer-

* Dr W. Thomson’s Letter, p. 33.

tainly not in the way that the author of this question supposes. He seems to think that the value of a medical certificate of fitness to practise is to be estimated entirely from the length of time which is required for the education of the student, and the number, together with the variety, of classes enjoined during its course.

What has been said in the early part of this Letter will, it is hoped, be sufficient to show that there is a limit to the number, as well as the complication of subjects which ought to be prescribed for the instruction of medical students, and that an overloaded curriculum may be considered even more objectionable than a defective one, inasmuch as the former is a positive, while the latter is only a negative evil. And the observations that have subsequently been offered in regard to the difference that may be expected to exist between the lectures of Professors selected by the public authorities, as best qualified to instruct the students and uphold the credit of the University, and the lectures of self-constituted teachers, who, to use a published expression of one of their own body, "have all to gain and nothing to lose," will, it is hoped, be sufficient to show that the course of study may vary in its value otherwise than in the mere circumstance of its extent. It is on this ground that university honours are to be viewed with respect;—it is on this ground that the degree of M. D. in the University of Edinburgh, though conveying no privilege whatever,—not even so much as the diploma of the College of Surgeons,—has for a long series of years been an object of ambition to candidates for medical distinction in every part of the world;—it is on this ground that every year brings to the University of Edinburgh practitioners of standing and respectability, who, having in the commencement of their career been satisfied with procuring a surgical diploma, or some less esteemed degree, such as the equivocal honour bestowed by our frail sister of St Andrews,—at length resolve to remedy the defect in their professional status, and, sacrificing for a time every consideration

of comfort and emolument, repair again to their *Alma Mater*, and subject themselves to the trammels of the school, as well as to the ordeal of examination.

And now it is necessary to notice a subject which would have been better omitted by the objectors to the proposal of the Medical Faculty,—I mean the motives which are attributed to us as influencing the course which we have taken. It is always very easy to impute questionable motives,—and certainly, if retaliation were any object of my present communication, the sincerity, purity, and disinterestedness of the motives which have excited the candidates and their friends to vituperate the Medical Faculty, and mystify the Council, would be a fruitful subject of observation. But as my object in addressing you is not to awaken or perpetuate disagreeable feelings, I shall say nothing whatever as to the motives of our adversaries; and shall merely take this opportunity of remarking, in regard to the language which some of them have used in addressing the Council, that the expressions and epithets which they have employed, and which differ so much from the ordinary communications of gentlemen, are not either becoming to them or respectful to you.

It has been again and again alleged and affirmed, that the Members of the Faculty have been influenced in their opposition to the Chair of General Pathology, by interested motives, and pecuniary considerations. That they have been solely actuated by such motives I deny; but that this influence has operated along with others in determining them to express their sentiments on this occasion, it would be absurd to doubt. Some of the Professors are more or less independent of their income as teachers, but others of them are not, and all of them regard this source of emolument with peculiar satisfaction, as being inseparably connected with the respectable situation they occupy, and as being in some degree a measure of their efficiency in discharging the duties confided to them, the privilege which they enjoy regulating only the *minimum*, and not the *maximum* of their

fees. The Medical Professors therefore, while, in common with the inhabitants of Edinburgh, they wish well for the prosperity of the University, and do so not the less sincerely, because their own character and estimation are intimately associated with the opinion which is entertained of it by the public, at the same time feel a pecuniary interest in the prosperity of the institution. And I am sure that the Patrons, after inviting gentlemen to come from distant parts of the country, where they were established in practice, and surrounded with all the attractions of a long established and friendly circle of acquaintances, to occupy chairs in the University, on the faith that, in the absence of any endowment or adequate salary, they should derive for the maintenance of themselves and families, in circumstances suited to the honourable office bestowed upon them, the emoluments attached to their respective departments without curtailment or interference,—will never question the fairness of pecuniary considerations entering into the calculation of the Professors. But it is fortunate that the pecuniary interests of the Professors, and the prosperity of the University are inseparably connected; and that, consequently, however unworthy it may seem to our adversaries, for professional men, to let their “petty interests,” that is to say, the provision for their support, at all occupy their thoughts or influence their conduct, no harm can accrue to the public, since, whatever increases the number of students attending the University, must benefit both parties.

The Medical Professors believe, on the present occasion, that imperative attendance on a course of General Pathology not only deters students from graduating in this University, but sours and dissatisfies those who do commit themselves to our guidance. They believe that, if this load were removed, the number of students would be increased, and the whole business of the School go on more comfortably.

In anticipation of such an obvious explanation of our conduct, it has been alleged that the Professors are not able to see into the distance, and discover any remote good for them-

selves or the University, being blinded by the glitter of an object immediately before them. The suppression of a chair, it is said, will diminish the number of the Medical Faculty, and increase the share of graduation fees, which are divided among them. Each graduate pays L. 10, 10s. to the Medical Faculty, the members of which are at present thirteen in number. There will this year be about 100 Graduates, and L. 1050 will consequently be divided into thirteen shares of L. 80 each. If the chair of General Pathology is abolished, the Medical Faculty will be reduced to twelve. And suppose the number of graduates keeps up in future to its present amount, each Professor will receive, in addition to what he now does, the twelfth part of L. 80, or L. 6, 13s. It is unhappily too true that the Professors are not rich; but I may safely leave the Council to determine whether they are so very poor, as to render this sum, “enormous” as it appears to our adversaries, so very splendid as to dazzle our mental vision,—and render us incompetent either to form an unprejudiced judgment of what is good for the University, or to offer a trustworthy opinion to the Council.

I have the honour to be,

MY LORD AND GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient Servant,

JAMES SYME,

Professor of Clinical Surgery.

9, CHARLOTTE SQUARE,

28th July 1837.

APPENDIX.

No. I.

"Edinburgh, 7th July 1837.

" WE, the undersigned Medical Professors in the University of Edinburgh, understanding that the Town-Council, as Patrons of the University, have resolved to accept Dr Thomson's resignation of the Chair of General Pathology, and engaged that he shall receive L. 150 annually as a retiring allowance from his successor, respectfully beg to make the following proposal :—

" Believing that the institution of a Chair of General Pathology in the University, though so far justified by the high reputation and eminent qualifications of Dr Thomson, was not required or expedient, since the subjects appropriated to it are inseparably connected with several other established departments of medical instruction, and most profitably taught in connexion with them ; and knowing that the circumstance of such a course being imperative on candidates for graduation in Edinburgh, is peculiarly oppressive, as there is no similar Chair in any other University of Great Britain or Ireland—we earnestly desire that this Professorship be abolished—and we, therefore, respectfully propose to the Council that it be now abolished, and that the retiring allowance to Dr Thomson shall be defrayed from the proceeds of a course of Lectures on General Pathology, which we are willing to undertake to deliver annually during his lifetime, on the understanding that the fee shall not exceed what may be estimated as sufficient for the purpose, and that any incidental surplus shall go to the matriculation fund.

" We are willing to bind ourselves to make good the full amount

of Dr Thomson's salary ; and we hope that this proposal will appear to the Council sufficient proof, that, in desiring the abolition of the Chair of General Pathology, we are actuated solely by our thorough conviction of its being unnecessary, and injurious to the interests of the Medical School, and by our anxiety to maintain the credit and efficiency of the University.

(Signed) " W. P. ALISON, P. Institutes of Medicine.
 " R. CHRISTISON, P. Materia Medica.
 " JAMES SYME, P. Clinical Surgery.
 " CHARLES BELL, P. Surgery.

Edinburgh, 7th July 1837.

"We, the undersigned Medical Professors in the University of Edinburgh, beg to express our entire approbation of the measures proposed above by our colleagues.

(Signed) " JAMES HOME, P. Practice of Medicine.
" G. BALLINGALL, P. Military Surgery.
" T. S. TRAIL, P. Med. Jurisprudence.
" THOS. CHAS. HOPE, P. Chemistry.
" R. GRAHAM, P. Medicine and Botany.
" JAS. HAMILTON, P. Midwifery.

Edinburgh College, July 28, 1837.

I concur in opinion with my Colleagues as to the Chair of Pathology. ALEXR. MONRO, M. D. & P.

No. II.

MEDICAL PROFESSORS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN.

1. Ordinary Professors.

Dr E. D. A. Bartels. Publicly, On the Aphorisms of Hippocrates, once a-week. Privately, Pathology, five days a-week, and Clinical Lectures (Medical) every day at the hospital.

Dr W. H. Busch. Publicly, Midwifery, two days a-week. Privately, Theory and Practice of Midwifery, twice a-week for two hours, and Clinical Midwifery, five days a-week for two hours each day. Most privately to those who wish it, he gives instructions in the principal operations required in Midwifery.

Dr C. F. de Graefe. Privately, Operations of Surgery, four days a-week, with Clinical Surgery and Ophthalmic Surgery.

Dr I. F. C. Hecker. Publicly, two days, Medical Encyclopædia. Privately, six days a-week, Pathology and History of Medicine, four days a-week.

Dr I. Horkel. Privately, Physiology, six days a-week.

Dr E. Horn. Publicly, on Syphilis, twice a-week. Privately, on Special Pathology of Acute and Chronic Diseases, four days a-week.

Dr C. W. Hufeland. Privately, when his health permits, Practice of Medicine in the Hospital.

Dr Fr. Hufeland. Publicly, Semiotics, twice a-week. Privately, General Pathology, four times a-week, and Special Pathology, six times.

Dr I. C. Jüngken. Publicly, once a-week, Diseases of the Ear. Privately, five times a-week, Diseases of the Eye and Clinical Lectures on the Eye, five times a-week. More privately, the Operations on the Eye.

Dr H. F. Link. Publicly, on Cryptogamous Plants, once a-week. Privately, Pharmacology, six times a-week.

Dr J. O. Müller. Publicly, Anatomy of the Organs of the Senses, three days a-week. Privately, Anatomy, six days a-week, and Anatomical Exercises with Professor Schlemm.

Dr Aem. Osann. Publicly, on Treatment of Accidents, twice a-week. Privately, on Materia Medica, six times a-week and Clinical Instruction, (Medical.)

Dr J. N. Rust. Privately, Surgery, General and Special, five times a-week, and Clinical Surgical Instruction, five times a-week.

Dr F. Schlemm. Publicly, on Ligaments and Aponeuroses, twice a-week. Privately, Osteology, three days a-week, Splanchnology, four days a-week, and Practical Anatomy with Muller. More privately, Surgical Operations.

Dr C. H. Schultz. Publicly, on Officinal and Poisonous Plants, once a-week. Privately, Physiology six times, and Materia Medica, six times a-week.

Dr W. Wagner. Publicly, Medical Police, once a-week. Privately, Pathology, six times a-week. Forensic Medicine, three

times a-week, and practical explanations on the latter, twice a-week.

2. Extraordinary Professors.

Dr J. L. Casper. Pathology and Diseases of Infants, twice a-week.

Dr J. F. Dieffenbach. Publicly on wounds once a-week. Privately, Surgery five times a-week.—More privately, Operations in Surgery.

Dr Th. G. Eck. Publicly, on Contagious Diseases once a-week. Privately, physiology six times a-week.

Dr C. G. Ehrenberg. Publicly on Anatomy and Physiology of some classes of animals, once a-week.

Dr R. Froriep. Publicly, Surgical Operations which physicians require to practise. Privately, Surgical Anatomy, four days a-week.

Dr C. A. F. Kluge. Publicly, Elements of Midwifery, twice a-week. Privately, Practical Midwifery, with other classes of Clinical Surgery, &c. &c.

Dr F. G. Kranichfeld. Publicly, Nosology twice a-week. Privately, on Hygiene four days a-week. Special Pathology of Human Eye, with operations six times a-week.

Dr G. C. Reich. Publicly, on diseases of Pregnancy and of the Foetus, once a-week. Privately on Pathology.

Dr L. F. Trüstedt. Privately, Clinical Surgery.

Dr E. Wolff. Privately, Clinical Instruction, six times a-week.

3. Private Teachers.

Dr C. Angelstein. *Gratis*, on Ophthalmic Surgery, once a-week. Privately, on Ophthalmic Surgery four times a-week, more privately, a course of operations in do.

Dr F. M. Ascherson. Privately, Surgery six days a-week, and four times a-week, on Splints and Bandages. More privately, Examinations on Surgery.

Dr Barez. On Diseases of Infants, five times a-week, *clinically*.

Dr E. Dann. *Gratis*, Diseases of the Ear twice a-week, Pathology, six times a-week.

Dr E. A. Graefe. Surgery, four days a-week.

Dr C. W. Ideler. *Gratis*, on Diseases of the Mind, three days a-week. Privately, Clinical Lectures on Diseases of the Mind, six times a-week.

Dr Aem. Isensee. *Gratis*, Psychology, Medical and Forensic, once a-week. Privately, Pathology and Therapeutics. More privately, on some new remedies.

Dr C. G. Mitscherlich. *Materia Medica*, six times a-week. More privately, Practical Pharmacy.

Dr A. H. Nicolai. Medical Police twice a-week.

Dr C. G. Th. Oppert. *Gratis*, on Syphilis twice a-week. Privately on Therapeutics.

Dr P. Phœbus. General Anatomy, four days a-week.

Dr Reckleben. On Veterinary Medicine, &c.

Dr M. H. Romberg. *Gratis*, on Diagnosis. Privately, on Diseases of Nervous System, twice a-week.

Dr M. Troschel. *Gratis*, on Heleology. Private, on Dental Surgery, with operations twice a-week, and surgery daily.

Dr F. A. Wilde. Practical Midwifery, and more privately, operations three times a-week.

